

His Own Brand of Marketing

by Mary James

Getting a home's performance problems treated in a systematic way requires leaping two hurdles. First, contractors need to be trained to use a whole-house approach; second, customers need to be trained to appreciate the value of whole-house services. Keith Williams, founder and owner of Building Services & Consultant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has been successfully clearing these twin hurdles for more than a decade, armed with his secret weapon: "I have a big mouth," says Williams.

Williams hasn't deployed his weapon in a take-it-to-the-streets fashion; networking is his tactic of choice. He talks up the advantages of whole-house contracting to groups of insulation contractors, heating contractors, home inspectors, raters, and builders. "I will do a presentation wherever I can fit in," says Williams. "I even do breakfast seminars." The recurring theme in his presentations is the need to test a house to identify the causes of its performance problems before starting any repairs or remodeling work, and then to test out at the end of the job to ensure that the house is now working safely.

This theme defines more than just his presentations. It has guided Williams's work since the mid-1980s, when he was first introduced to the blower door. As an insulation contractor and consultant for various utility and weatherization programs, he had plenty of opportunity to experiment with the early models of blower doors, and to perfect the art of interpreting blower door test results. His big mouth came in handy back then, also. "I just kept raising questions about what we were doing and how we were doing it," says Williams. His questioning led him, first,



to appreciate the value of performance-testing his own insulation installations, and then to a specialization in qualifying the work of other insulation contractors. With further training, he branched out into diagnosing more general home performance problems. Four years ago, diagnosing and performance-testing homes became both compelling enough and profitable enough that he stopped doing installations. Today, Williams works exclusively as a home performance consultant, with testing homes, evaluating other contractors' work, and training contractors as his three primary sources of business.

While Williams was perfecting his understanding of performance testing and whole-house diagnostics, the state of Wisconsin was making early forays into developing a whole-house contracting market. In 1995, the state's

Public Service Commission permitted gas utilities to trade reductions in energy savings targets for implementation of market preparation programs. Wisconsin Gas Company (WGC) responded to this initiative by training contractors to offer whole-house diagnostic services.

In late 1995, Williams became one of WGC's trainers—a role he continued to play until the demise of WGC's Whole-House program in 2000. Simultaneously, Williams was turning into one of the program's star pupils. This program helped to prime the state market for whole-house contracting services, and Williams took full advantage of that priming. As WGC's program wound down, Williams expanded his business into offering

whole-house diagnostic testing and evaluation services to homeowners. These services, which he still offers today, include blower door tests to identify air leaks and equipment safety checks of the appliances. As a certified home energy rater, he will also conduct a home energy audit, if desired. After writing up a detailed specification of all the home performance work that needs doing, Williams rounds out the service by handing the homeowner a list of well-trained contractors. "I had the advantage at that point, because I had other contractors that I knew from the whole-house program that were already trained," says Williams.

But Williams's services don't end with these recommendations. After the chosen improvements have been completed, Williams makes a return visit to evaluate the repairs and perform postproject equipment safety checks. "I

measure changes in building shell tightness, test any new equipment that has been installed, and inspect thermal shell improvements both visually and using an infrared camera while I depressurize the house with a blower door,” says Williams. He provides a wrap-up report to the customer, detailing areas of concern, if there are any, and rework procedures that he recommends. “I usually will cc the involved contractor,” says Williams. “This process is extremely important to the customer and serves as a quality control tool for the contractor.”

In late 2001, as Williams was expanding his home performance consulting business, the state of Wisconsin was adopting the Home Performance with Energy Star program to serve existing housing. This program was one of a portfolio of programs created through Wisconsin’s Focus on Energy Initiative. The state chose to implement a program for existing housing that featured the Energy Star label because Wisconsin consumers were already familiar with the Energy Star label for new homes and other energy-efficient products and services.

Recognizing the value of Williams’s training and private sector experience, the state’s program implementers, the Wisconsin Energy Conservation Corporation (WECC), quickly tapped Williams for assistance in designing the program. From advisory committee member, Williams moved on to a position as an outreach specialist for the emerging program—another opportunity for exploiting his big-mouth talents. “We were like apostles spreading the word,” jokes Williams. And spread it he has. In the first year of operation, Home Performance with Energy Star completed 97 households, but that figure jumped to 422 households in the second year. Last year Williams made a dozen presentations to various groups describing the benefits of Home Performance with Energy Star. He also trained eight groups of contractors in topics that ranged from basic building science to air sealing and dense-pack techniques. Thanks in part to Williams’s efforts, consultants and contractors are



MICHAEL WILLIAMS

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currently completing an average of 80 households per month.

Altogether 41 home performance consultants, including Williams, ensure the quality of the contracting work conducted through Wisconsin’s Home Performance with Energy Star. “Consultants are a critical aspect of the program, since its concept is based in third-party verification of completed work,” says Gregg Newman, WECC’s program manager for Home Performance with Energy Star. “Wisconsin works with consultants to build localized networks of program providers, which include insulators, HVAC contractors, remodelers, and home improvement companies.”

Williams has built his own localized network. As of now, he has persuaded four insulation contractors to sell insulation packages to their customers that include a Home Performance with Energy Star evaluation along with the

insulation and air sealing work. “The homeowner needs to understand that an evaluation is part of doing business for a good contractor,” says Williams. Williams has similar arrangements with three heating contractors. He has recently begun trying to woo remodelers with some success, as has the Wisconsin program. A total of 34 remodelers are currently participating in the program, 24 of whom signed on in the past six months.

Building Services & Consultant, Williams’s consulting business, has grown as the Home Performance with Energy Star program has grown, with annual gross sales tripling over the last three years. “Three years ago it was just me doing two or three evaluations a week. Now it’s three of us doing an average of 1.5 evaluations a day,” says Williams. Roughly 25% of his home performance consulting work comes from word-of-mouth referrals from

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customers, 10% comes from contractor referrals, and the remaining 65% comes from leads generated by Williams's talking to anyone who will listen, combined with program-sponsored marketing. Periodic statewide advertising campaigns promoting Home Performance with Energy Star have been very supportive, according to Williams. When he first started performing evaluations for homeowners, they expected to receive free energy audits, because that is a service that utilities had been providing. "What is really neat, now, is that they ask, 'How much does an evaluation cost?'" says Williams.

Williams charges the homeowner an up-front fee of \$275. The fee covers testing, writing up specifications for a contractor to bid on, and helping that homeowner to find a contractor who will get the work done properly. For households in which the work is completed, WECC pays Williams and other

home performance consultants incentives that average \$225. Similarly, homeowners can get Home Performance with Energy Star cash rewards to offset the fee if they follow through on Williams's recommendations and final testing verifies that the work has been performed. Typical incentives currently average \$450 per housing unit. However, Wisconsin will reduce some of its customer incentives beginning in July of this year—a change that Williams supports. "The home performance evaluation process and service must be able to stand on its own without incentives," says Williams.

In promoting Home Performance with Energy Star evaluations, Williams see himself as an advocate for homeowners. Helping them to identify the causes of their comfort problems, select a contractor, and then verify that the work was successfully completed is a win-win situation for all concerned, says Williams. "The homeowner wins, the contractor

wins, the state wins." And through this process Williams gets to experience his version of success: seeing that the homeowner valued his recommendations enough to follow through with the suggested work and that the referred contractor successfully made the improvements, which Williams checks during the postevaluation process.

When asked what he attributes his success to, Williams becomes almost uncharacteristically quiet. "Most people who are in home performance contracting can make a business at it," says Williams, "but it is a slow process. I attribute my success to being creative and persistent." Williams spends very little money on traditional marketing—maybe \$50 a year on business cards. His marketing style is at a more grassroots level, where his secret to success—his big mouth—can have the most effect.



Mary James is the publisher of *Home Energy*.